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News

What makes a 'top doc'? Study assesses media's favourite medical cliché

They're the high-fliers of the medical world — until they fall from grace, say researchers looking at the who's who of top docs



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One of Australia's favourite top docs, Perth plastic surgeon Professor Fiona Wood. Photo: AAP.

It's handy in a headline and can include anyone from the Chief Medical Officer to academics to doctors fallen from grace.

The label 'top doctor' or 'top doc' began appearing in newspaper headlines around 1985 and has grown increasingly popular — especially since 2015 — UK researchers say.

They decided to find out who all these top doctors were, given the title often conferred extra weight to their views or the stories.

After trawling media reports for 2019, the authors discovered 303 headlines featured a top doctor or top doc and met their criteria.

One in five top docs were found to be GPs, and four in five were men.

They were registered for a median of 31 years, and frequently held positions of status in the NHS, the British Medical Association or medical colleges.

But journalists seemed to use a lower bar when deciding if doctors facing disciplinary proceedings were also a top doc.

“Top doctors’ facing disciplinary proceedings are more overwhelmingly male, working in hospital specialties and less obviously eminent in their field,” said the study authors, led by Glaswegian palliative care specialist Professor Mark Taubert.

“Journalists seem happy to refer to relatively undistinguished medical practitioners as a ‘top doctor’.

“We assume that this was purposefully done to weave a powerful ‘fall from grace’ narrative, that is, a doctor who was once at the top, was now sentenced to a life in prison, for instance.”

They drew up a British league table of top docs, with former Chief Medical Officer Professor Dame Sally Davies at number one, NHS England’s medical director at two and a former chair of the UK Royal College of GPs in third.

A brief and completely unscientific analysis of *AusDoc* stories found chief medical officers, notably Victoria’s former top doc Brett Sutton, college presidents and AMA presidents were commonly awarded the title, especially during the early years of the pandemic.

Academics, an array of non-GP specialists and doctors working for charities also got the gong.

The study authors did issue a warning about the dangerous use of top doc to push supposed miracle cures or to pump up stories when the doctor’s opinion aligned with the newspaper’s publisher.

“The title ‘top doctor’ ... would appear to be an entirely subjective and contingent phenomenon, bequeathed at the apparent whim of journalists,” they concluded.

They suggested a formal criteria for determining top doc status could be put out by the UK Faculty of Medical Leadership and Management.

“This could distinguish true ‘top doctors’ from charlatans wishing to make a name for themselves,” the authors concluded.

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